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## ON EXPOSITORY PREACHING.\*

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It has been suggested that I should say something on this subject, especially with reference to the exposition of historical Scripture. One or two of the preceding writers have cautioned against a too exclusive use of historical passages, thereby implying that some persons find this easy. This is gratifying, for I am persuaded that the great mass of ministers, when attempting an expository discourse, take some doctrinal, preceptive, or devotional portion. No one can overlook the fact that the greater part of the Bible consists of history, much of it biography; and that all the other portions have a historical setting, which we cannot afford to overlook if we wish to make thorough study. Yet some ministers rarely take a properly historical text; or if they do, it is only the introduction that takes account of the narrative, and then a subject is evolved, and treated in the usual fashion. But all mankind are interested in a story, a narrative, an account of actual persons, in their actual life, and exhibiting their distinctive characteristics. If the Bible is so rich in these elements, ought they not to have a large part in our sermons?

But remember that we are not undertaking to write a biblical story, or to give a lecture on Bible history. We are going to make a sermon which must have very practical aims and bearings that determine the whole management of the discourse. Some ministers, who are fond of history, just give a series of Lyceum lectures upon topics or persons of Bible history, lectures that may be brilliant, highly enter-

\* This article was prepared to form one of a series of discussions on Expository Preaching which have been from time to time published in these pages. It will be sufficient to refer readers to the May, June and July, 1890, numbers of THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDENT for the previous articles, opinions and letters, bearing on the subject.

taining, even instructive in the way of historical discussion, but that do not powerfully impel the hearer toward a religious life, as sermons ought to do.

On the other hand, many are restrained from attempting historical exposition by the persuasion that they have no talent for narration and description. Perhaps the dignity of this periodical may endure a couple of anecdotes, which at least conform to the etymology of that term, for hitherto they have been unpublished. Years ago a singularly able young man came to be pastor where I lived, who was a vigorous and exact thinker, and whose sermons were full of wholesome truth. We were intimate friends, and one day I asked him if he had paid much attention to preaching on the Bible history. He said, Oh, no, because he had no talent in the world for description. He had once tried a sermon on Balaam—which some might think a rather knotty subject to begin on—and making a wretched failure, had never repeated the attempt. It was folly for him to attempt such a sermon, because he could not describe. I insisted that he could do something better than describing, he could take up some person, and analyze his motives and character, so as to make him yield a rich variety of interesting and useful, practical lessons. He could not deny that he was conscious of power to analyze, and so he consented to make an attempt in that direction. It was not two years before this was his favorite class of sermons, and particularly welcomed by his hearers; and he would get in some good bits of description, too, when the subject called for it.

The other anecdote relates to a man who had reached middle age, was a profound thinker, a lecturer rarely equalled, and when he felt at his ease, a preacher of extraordinary power. Shortly after the war closed, he preached a deeply impressive sermon at an association in the country, upon the text, "Wait on the Lord," etc. He, of course, understood it to mean "wait for the Lord," and one of his illustrations was as follows: "The mother or wife sits at her window in the dusk of evening, looking along the road upon which she hopes soon to see her son or husband returning from the war. She is waiting for him." The application is

obvious. As we rode away that afternoon I said, "My friend, what made you spoil that pleasant little picture you gave us of the woman sitting at the window in the dusk? You said the mother *or* wife, looking for the son *or* husband; I couldn't see one for the other." "Oh, pshaw!" he answered, "I was a fool for attempting such a thing. I never can make a description, and I never attempt it except through forgetting myself." Upon being asked how he knew he could not, he said that in his first sermon, which was in the presence of his older brother, a minister, he made some little attempt at description, and his brother afterwards told him not to try that again, for he evidently had no turn that way. "So I have always tried to avoid it," he said, "and am ashamed to have been betrayed into the awkward attempt to-day." I took earnest exception, insisting that any man who could state a thought with such clear-cut edges, and make a series of arguments spring into life as he could, might be able to describe a scene, if he would take half as much trouble to prepare for it as he took in preparing his arguments and statements. After much talk, I playfully dared him to make an honest attempt. Some weeks later we met on the street, and he stopped with a smile and told me that the previous Sunday he had preached in a country church a dozen miles away upon the parable of the sower; and as it was just the season for sowing wheat, he thought in preparing the sermon that he would try to make his farmer hearers see the sower as he scattered the grain, and it fell on different kinds of soil. "And I am bound to acknowledge," he said with a pleasant laugh, "that I think I really did succeed. I give it up." Not long after, I went to preach for him at that same church, and dined with an estimable deacon. At dinner we were talking about my friend their pastor, and they needed but little encouragement to tell of one sermon and another as especially remembered and valued. At length the deacon's wife broke out, "And I tell you, I never heard the like of that sermon last fall about the parable of the sower, when he described that man going across the field sowing wheat. Hi! I can see him now." Here was a man of extraordinary abilities, and supremely

anxious to preach well, who had gone on to middle age with a mistaken notion growing out of an unlucky suggestion as to his earliest sermon, and yet the very first time he really attempted to describe a scene the success was remarkable.

These instances may lead some to consider a question as to which I have no doubt. Are there not many men, by no means negligent as to self-development, very anxious to do their best, who go on for years thinking they cannot do this, or cannot do that, simply because of some early failure easily accounted for, or some well-meant but unwarranted discouragement? Are there not probably men who live on and die without ever having developed potencies that were really capable of great effectiveness? Ought not a minister who wishes to make the best of himself, while practicing chiefly those methods of preaching in which he most readily succeeds, yet occasionally to try all manner of experiments, and find out other ways in which he may have reasonable success, thereby enriching his own development, and giving the variety so much needed by his heterogeneous audience?

Not every man will excel in expository preaching. But every man can learn to make fairly interesting and really helpful expository sermons, if he can preach well in any way, and if he will practice this kind of preaching now and then. Only let him make very careful preparation, taking pains to give the sermon unity, decided movement, vivacity, and abundant practical applications. For one, I am quite sure that expository preaching will become increasingly popular in our country throughout the next generation of ministerial life. Without saying more, I may mention a few specimens of historical exposition which are easily accessible, and in their several ways might be particularly helpful:—

Candlish on “Scripture Characters,” and also on Genesis; Bruce on “The Training of the Twelve,” which has just appeared in a new edition; the half-dozen volumes of William M. Taylor, particularly those on David and on Paul; Hanna’s Life of Christ, which consists of expository sermons; and it is matter of special gratification that the Christian Literature Society (35 Bond Street, New York City) can now furnish volumes of Chrysostom, who is to wise students the most instructive and stimulating of all expository preachers.